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#### NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

## Hearing Addresses Rise in Fatal Medical Helicopter Crashes

By [Jenna Johnson](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer  
Wednesday, February 4, 2009; Page B02

The National Transportation Safety Board began a four-day hearing in Washington yesterday to examine a spike last year in fatal crashes of medical helicopters, including one in Maryland that killed four people.

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Relatives of medical helicopter crash victims are among those who listened to testimony. Last year, 29 people died in 13 crashes, including one in Maryland. (By Preston Keres -- The Washington Post)

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NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD: Hearing Addresses Rise in Fatal Medical Helicopter Crashes

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In 2008, 29 people died in 13 emergency medical helicopter crashes, incidents that safety experts attribute to human error, bad weather and other causes.

"The recent accident record is alarming, and it is unacceptable," said NTSB board member Robert L. Sumwalt, chairman of the hearing.

Those crashes have intensified scrutiny of medical helicopter regulations, which safety experts say are more lax than general commercial aviation rules.

The board does not plan to take action or make recommendations during the hearing. Instead, it will hear presentations from industry experts and question more than 40 witnesses, including pilots, private medical helicopter operators and Federal Aviation Administration officials.

Testimony yesterday focused on privately run medical helicopter operators. Maryland is unusual in that it relies mainly on a state-funded helicopter system operated by the Maryland State Police. Although the helicopters are also used for law enforcement and other services, about 80 percent of flights are emergency medical transports.

Robert R. Bass, director of the Maryland Institute of Emergency Medical Services Systems, testified yesterday but did not address the Maryland crash. He provided an overview of the history of the more than 30-year-old helicopter program but referred questions to state police when asked about triage procedures and other practices. No state police representative testified.

For years, the safety board has urged the FAA to increase its regulation of medical aircraft. NTSB representatives say the FAA has been slow to fully respond to four recommendations

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the board made in January 2006: Make flight regulations for medical helicopters consistent, rather than having separate rules for when a patient is on board. Develop flight risk evaluation programs. Formalize dispatch and other procedures, including making decisions based on up-to-date weather information. And install terrain awareness and warning systems in all helicopters.

Those recommendations were drafted in response to crashes between January 2002 and January 2005, when 55 accidents caused 54 fatalities. At the time, the board said 29 of those accidents could have been prevented if the FAA had mandated the four recommendations.

The FAA is pursuing new rules based on the NTSB recommendations, said spokesman Les Dorr. But many helicopter operators are implementing the recommendations on their own, Dorr said.

"While more regulations is one way to do things, it's not the only way to do things," Dorr said.

In late September, Maryland Trooper 2 crashed while transporting two teenagers who were injured in a car accident in Southern Maryland. The crash was the worst in the history of the state program. The only survivor, Jordan Wells of Waldorf, attended the hearing yesterday afternoon.

An investigation into that crash is continuing. The crash occurred on a rainy night, and NTSB documents make clear that the pilot received an hours-old weather report.

About a month after that crash, and after a crash outside Chicago that killed four, the NTSB intensified its plea to the FAA to change medical helicopter regulations and placed its recommendations on the "Federal Most Wanted List of Transportation Safety Improvements."

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